

“RESETTING IRAN-GCC RELATIONS: IS IT REAL?”



SUMMARY OF A GULF INTERNATIONAL FORUM (GIF) WEBINAR



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OVERVIEW

Since early 2021, de-escalation efforts and dialogue have accelerated rapidly between Iran and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member Saudi Arabia and, in a separate channel, the United Arab Emirates. Over the past year and a half, Riyadh and Tehran have conducted several rounds of talks in Baghdad, while the United Arab Emirates demonstrated a willingness to de-escalate tensions with Tehran in spite of its growing outreach to Tel Aviv after the “Abraham Accords” of mid-2020.

Meanwhile Other GCC member states have preserved their own individual links to Iran:

- Qatar has sought to strengthen its position as a regional mediator by hosting in-direct talks between Washington and Tehran;
- Kuwait continues to balance its relations between Tehran and Riyadh;
- Oman has preserved its excellent relationship with all sides, as demonstrated by Iranian leader Ebrahim Raisi’s recent visit to Muscat.

However, in spite of a regional reduction in tensions, there has been no meaningful accommodation or breakthroughs in the talks between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and Saudi Arabia (KSA), with the negotiations between the Gulf’s two pillar states being exclusively focused on security issues, rather than political cooperation or the formal restoration of the two countries’ severed diplomatic ties. As a result, potential benefits from all the other GCC states’ dialogues with Iran continues to remain unclear, and as such, the outcomes of those discussions could also be affected by ongoing events such as the success or failure of the “JCPOA” nuclear negotiations in Vienna.

The GIF webinar, attended by a number of regional experts and moderated by the Omani scholar, Abdullah Baabood examined the prospects for further de-escalation as part of a broader rapprochement – i.e., more than individual states simply attempting to preserve their own interests – in the near future.

KEY COMMENTS MADE BY SPEAKERS

1. ALEX VATANKA (*Middle East Institute, Washington*)

- With the exception of Bahrain, all Persian Gulf states are dealing in one way or another in trying to deescalate tensions.
- In this relationship with Iran, Oman and Qatar stand out as the friendliest while Kuwait (as well as UAE in this respect) has tried to maintain a balance by returning its Ambassador to Tehran.
- Although KSA-IRI talks are continuing, it is fair to say that there is an absence of 'political confidence', though Iran is perhaps more anxious that diplomatic ties (severed since 2016) should once again be fully resumed.
- On trade and investment, movement has been slow though there are hopes of increased ties with Doha in this respect especially in the aftermath of the Football World Cup that is to be staged in Qatar later this month.
- What is certain is that no Gulf state including the most hawkish ones do not want any kind of conflict, especially between Iran and the US (in this regard the Gulf states have even shied away from the concept of having an integrated air defence as discussed in a gathering between them in Cairo most recently).
- At the same time, Gulf states still continue to rely on the US to respond to any serious attack coming from the IRI.
- As such they do not wish to provoke the IRI without at the same time agreeing with its regional agenda.
- In the final analysis, while the Gulf States are quite sober about the reality that the IRI will not withdraw from its regional commitments, they can take some solace by at least being able to have ongoing talks with them (e.g., like over Yemen where a cease fire has so far held up).
- It thus follows that what is important is tangible dialogue that distances all parties from 'zero-sum' considerations.
- On the positive side, while the IRI has prudently accepted to come to terms with the Abraham Accord, a need might be felt on the part of the IRI in wanting to turn a potential new JCPOA agreement into a steppingstone for other things.
- It is essential to understand that the IRI wants to change the image of the region and that Khamenei and the IRGC will never change course (bearing in mind that others within the system may want something different).
- Hence, there is a brewing challenge to both the ongoing domestic and foreign policies that pit Iran's national interest against the ideological interests of a small few.

2. DR. ALI ALKANDARI (*Kuwait University*)

- Kuwait's stance towards Iran is not a new policy and dates back to the time in 1976 when under the rule of Jaber al-Ahmad, it was first

suggested by Kuwait that a body of 8 countries, consisting of the current GCC in addition to Iran and Iraq be created for purposes of promoting trade and other economic ties.

- The creation of such an arrangement is still very much in the mind of the current Kuwaiti leaders (bearing in mind that some 25% of Kuwaitis come from an Iranian heritage) .
- While the 1980s - mainly because of the Iran-Iraq war - constituted a rough time for all the Gulf State, the advent of the 1990s up to 911 brought positive change in the right direction.
- Post 911, concern with Iran's nuclear ambitions, further exacerbated an already complicated relationship not just between Iran and the GCC but this time with the added Israeli factor.
- However, within the GCC, Oman and Kuwait have had historically good ties with Iran in the past and more recently (especially after the end of KSA led sanctions against it) Qatar has also tried to play a more positive role by acting as a mediator between Iran and the US and KSA which have produced such tangible results as the ongoing fragile cease fire in Yemen.
- On the subject of what Iran, for its part as opposed to the opposite case, might want from the GCC, the matter is not very clear - e.g., Iran's suggestion in this regard for a GCC positive consideration of its 'Hormuz Peace Initiative' is essentially a non-starter in the sense that the proposal would have the US and all its European allies leave the Persian Gulf altogether - something that the GCC members cannot accept at this time and do not want.
- It was nonetheless a reality that for its part, the GCC alone did not have sufficient leverage on Iran to accede to some of its desires such as changing its regional policy and leaving places like Iraq, Lebanon or Syria (not to mention Yemen). It is a fact that in this regard, the IRI has not taken a single step backward but has instead increased its general presence and influence.
- Thus, for the time being, the most the GCC can hope for is to remain reactive while trying to have manageably good ties with Iran noting that 'maximum pressure' did not lead to any major positive breakthroughs.

3. DANIELLE PLETKA (*Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute*)

- So far, US pressures over Iran in the past 4 decades has failed to produce any results.
- However, while America has not been able to contain Iran on the terrorism front, the US has had some success in slowing down Iranian nuclear and missile programs.

- As matters stand, the US does not know what Iran's true ambitions are (e.g., does it want to go for the North Korean option or the Japanese option (i.e., real vs virtual nuclear power).
- The argument by the Biden Administration that it is slowing down Iran is weak and not acceptable to all parties.
- Hence, rapprochement between Iran and the GCC (along with many other examples) is nothing more than a "window dressing" that means nothing in reality, given that the fundamental issues having to do with the nature of the Iranian regime have not changed.
- Indeed, based on historical realities of the past 43 years, every single moment of peace and quiet have been followed by moments of opportunism to undermine the GCC states.
- It is a fact that the IRI is not interested in say a peaceful and democratic Iraq and there is no apparent reason why this should change.
- Indeed, the tenuous cease fire in Yemen has been used by the IRGC as an opportunity for reinforcing the Houthis as part of their plan to hit the 'soft underbelly of Saudi Arabia'.
- Therefore, there can be no fundamental change so long as the current regime remains in power.
- Based on such an assessment, US pivoting away from the region is no longer the issue, based on the reality that neither China or Russia will ever defend the Gulf states against Iran, especially since there is no evidence that the IRI has moderated or changed its regional ambitions.
- On the contrary, there is evidence that they have accelerated their proxies and in the event of an new JCPOA, they will most likely provide more money to their surrogate friends based in various parts of the region.
- It is also important noting that when there have been no indication at any time that the regime has shown any interest in the welfare of its own people at a time when the regime has been complicit in the death of 50,000+ Syrians, it is so naïve to think that they truly want peace with the GCC!
- If you ask MBS he will say that Iran is at war with you and history tells us that no meaningful change can come so long as first-generation leaders are still there!
- In conclusion, any re-setting with Iran is simply more of the same. So long as Khamenei is alive, they will not change their stripes.

